

## Corrections Emerges Strong Following Katrina

By [Michelle Gaseau](#), Managing Editor (Corrections.com)

9/12/2005

Shoeless, soaked, tired and hungry, displaced inmates from Louisiana's hurricane-ravaged counties arrived at correctional facilities across the state. And the institutions that received them over the last two weeks were ready and waiting.

Some facilities receiving prisoners – such as Washington Correctional Institute – operated via emergency generators and had no functioning phone lines, but were still able to provide for the incoming offenders and shelter staff and their families who had lost everything. And in the decimated New Orleans and Jefferson Parish areas, correctional, probation and parole staff have evacuated thousands of offenders and helped bring private citizens to safety.

“It’s amazing. We moved more than 8,000 inmates and no one was injured. We were lifting kids over scaffolding; I really felt like I was back in Vietnam with the helicopters. A lot of people stepped up to the plate [during the storm]. I think our evacuation was success,” said Warden **Jimmy LeBlanc** of Dixon Correctional Institute, which also took in evacuees from Hurricane Katrina.

Prior to Katrina, Warden **James Miller** of Washington Correctional Institute took in 179 offenders from Plaquemines Parish and then watched as the wind howled, trees blew over, electricity and power ceased.

“We anticipated it would pass through 20-30 miles east of us. We were on the good side of the eye; we were fortunate,” said Miller.

For Miller, fortunate meant more than a week without phone service and regular communication, and powering the facility by generator. But on the positive side, fortunate also meant that there was enough food and water to feed all the inmates and staff, and that staff showed up for work despite losing their homes and personal belongings in the storm.

The challenges that WCI faced also prompted Miller to be creative in the face of crisis.

When a generator threatened to fail, he found one from Angola State Penitentiary as a back up. When he needed a water tank moved to his facility, but lacked transportation, he found a tractor trailer driver disconnecting at a local service station. He offered diesel fuel in exchange for transporting the tank, and got it moved.

“I’m still doing some horse swapping,” said Miller last week.

Despite housing displaced staff members, serving as a distribution center for food and water for the Washington Parish residents and being under a boil-water precaution, WCI, as of late last week, is almost back to regular operations, according to Miller.

Inmate work crews have been sent out to help with the clean-up, although they had to remove downed trees to get to the facility entrance first, and the facility even held its annual Labor Day cookout for staff and their families.

One continued focus for Miller and his staff in the aftermath of Katrina is helping offenders locate their families. Many have not heard from loved ones since the storm, he said.

"One of the big concerns is that most of the population is from the New Orleans area. I have charged the mental health staff to talk with offenders and make the calls to family members and we've been doing that," he said. "So far we've only had one death notification."

At Angola State Penitentiary, officials received about 1,700 inmates -- including 500 female offenders they were not expecting -- both prior and following the storm.

According to Assistant Warden **Cathy Fontenot**, the facility was prepared with mattresses and food but, because it does not normally house women, officials had to be creative on that front. Fontenot said officials moved 500 trustees out of their regular dorm and into the gymnasium in order to place the female offenders in a separate facility. Angola officials also needed feminine sanitary supplies and clothing, which they received from other correctional facilities both inside and outside of the state.

"We had 10 pregnant inmates and they are being transported out. We had a woman go into false labor yesterday," said Fontenot, who added that overall the inmates have been patient. "Those we have received have been very appreciative. They see us working around the clock and our inmates appreciate what we have done to get information to their families; we have been able to tell them their families are safe."

Meanwhile, in Mississippi Department of Corrections Commissioner **Christopher Epps** has been overseeing evacuation and clean up in the southern regions of his state.

According to Epps, in preparation for the storm the DOC moved 531 inmates from community work centers and restitution centers in Jackson, Harrison, George, Pike and Wilkerson counties.

Offenders from Pike and Wilkinson evacuated to a large prison just outside of Jacksonville. The others went to the South Correctional Institution in Lakesville, Miss. Epps said the inmates were housed in the gymnasium and visitation areas.

"The only problems we ran into were we were out of power at both prisons. Obviously we have generators and they run off diesel fuel. What happened is we got into a need for diesel," he said. "What we did is went through our director of agriculture who knew a farmer and went through a probation and parole officer whose brother who was a farmer."

In addition, both facilities holding the evacuated inmates lost power and electricity for several days and sustained water and wind damage.

"I went down several times. We have windows out roof damage; water up to six feet high. This hurricane came in, in some places, 30 feet high. We have perimeter fence down, trees down," said Epps.

But as of last week, the majority of displaced offenders have returned to their original institutions.

"We are holding our own. The inmates are fine; we have been able to communicate to their relatives and friends and we are letting them talk and we have chaplains visiting with them, and staff and medical staff are dealing with their emotions," he said.

Back in New Orleans, correctional staff and tactical teams from all over the state and other areas, such as Kentucky, were busy last week erecting a temporary jail facility in a Greyhound bus and Amtrak train station.

According to Angola Warden **Burl Cain**, who was on loan to oversee the operation, "Camp Greyhound" is housing those arrested in the chaos that followed Hurricane Katrina. Cain said one prisoner was arrested for shooting at a helicopter, others for looting.

The makeshift facility, including its computers and lights, is powered by a locomotive, Cain said. Offenders first come to the terminal after arrest and are then booked and interviewed, then sent on to the Elayn Hunt Correctional Institute for adjudication.

Cain expects this temporary jails will be in place for weeks, if not months.

"We're in real good control here. What's really important is the National Guard and tactical teams from Angola and the department of corrections are providing security. One of the success stories is everyone is working together," Cain said.

Cain added that several correctional officers from the Kentucky Department of Correction are also involved in security and operations at the terminal jail. He added that more officers could be needed.

And help is on the way.

### Relief Efforts

Two days after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, Kentucky Department of Corrections Commissioner **John Rees** had permission from the governor to send help and supplies.

"By Friday [Sept. 2] we were moving. I have been in conversations with [Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections] Secretary **Richard Stalder** and knew what he was going through. We made the decision and pulled the trigger on it. It's a 12-hour drive but it took them 14 because they had difficulty finding fuel," said Rees.

A total of 24 corrections staff went originally (including truck drivers) and 18 stayed. The trucks were loaded with supplies including women's clothing, sanitary supplies, food, mattresses and flex cuffs.

The Kentucky officers are primarily providing security and working at the makeshift lock-up at the Greyhound station in New Orleans but, according to Rees, replacements are on the way.

"They are pretty whipped right now and ready to come home. Their spirits are high and they are doing a heck of a job," Rees said.

New York City corrections officers and supervisors are also on the ground in Louisiana. According to NYC Commissioner of Correction and Probation **Martin Horn**, 240 officers and staff have volunteered to go to Louisiana to help officers there. Last Wednesday a detail of 22 staff (20 officers, one captain and one deputy warden) were dispatched in a convoy of seven vehicles, including two tractor trailers and two box trucks filled with supplies.

Last Thursday a second convoy left with 50 staff (47 corrections officers, and three captains) on two buses.

And those in corrections who are not in the gulf are also lending a hand.

According to **Patty Spataro**, Deputy Superintendent for Classification and Programs for the Norfolk County, Mass., Sheriff's Office, employees are gathering supplies and donations to assist the staff of the Washington Correctional Institute in Louisiana.

"So many of the staff have come forward and have asked the superintendent and supervisors what we were going to do. Sheriff **[Michael] Bellotti** felt that it would be meaningful to reach out to a sister facility and help employees of that facility. They are living there and operating there in some pretty bad circumstances," she said.

Spataro said that WCI's Warden Miller reported that many of his staff suffered significant damage to their homes and will have to do major construction work to be able to live in them again.

"They need money for repairs, basic staples, food. We are working on facility committees and we are going to do clothing drives and some fundraising. We still have to meet to develop some fundraising efforts," said Spataro, who added that the unions and other organizations locally are all supportive of the effort.

In addition, officials from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections are awaiting approval from FEMA to send correctional staff to assist.

"We are hoping to send 20 COs and six critical incident debriefing team members," said **Sheila Moore** spokesperson for the DOC. "People are ready. We're hoping but we haven't received final approval. [But] we are sending supplies from correctional industries [and] DOC employees are gathering a lot of [items]."

Specific relief funds have also been set up to assist those correctional staff who have been affected by Hurricane Katrina – and there are many including funds by the North American Association of Wardens and Superintendents and Association of State Correctional Administrators. In Mississippi, the Disaster Relief fund is taking donations to assist staff there. In Louisiana, donations go through **Jannitta Antoine**, Deputy Secretary for the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Correction.

### **Preparation and Lessons Learned**

While help is needed and pouring in, hindsight following the storm has shown corrections officials that their preparation plans may have helped avert a worse outcome.

According to Warden **Jimmy LeBlanc** evacuation plans and protocols worked well.

"Two things in my mind were so important: to know we had buses and vans and places to put [inmates]. It's so important," he said.

Evacuation plans assigned specific duties to certain staff members and the plans were coordinated through a central command, which helped keep the evacuation moving forward.

"At times I had 2,000 inmates on the interstate. The buses kept showing up and we knew relief was coming," said LeBlanc.

Leblanc said officials will take some lessons from the evacuation and recovery effort.

"For the most part I really feel good about what we did. The biggest issue was a complete collapse of the criminal justice system. All agencies should look at that," he said. "We need to come together with a plan. We had to get into the law enforcement business because we had to set up the jail."

Leblanc explained that officials from the parish jail do not have arresting power in New Orleans, so when the evacuation of the jail happened it created a vacuum of power and the New Orleans Police Department was not at full strength.

For corrections, having handled similar evacuations before and having emergency response plans in place helped operations run well.

"There's no question that having the plans in place helped us. We are able to concentrate in one area and that helps us too whereas outside corrections it's such a large area of response it makes it difficult for other agencies to come in," said Leblanc.

Leblanc said he watched in amazement as boat, firemen, ambulances and every kind of emergency vehicle wanted to come in to New Orleans to help but no one knew what to do or where to go.

“You talk about organized confusion; it made it so chaotic,” he said.

Leblanc said many corrections officials remembered and benefited from the experience of an evacuation during a severe storm in the early 90s. Facilities lost generators and jails had to be evacuated. The only different this time, was they could not drive to the jail, they had to use a boat.

One other lesson that Leblanc expects will be discussed is mandatory evacuation prior to a large storm. Orleans and Jefferson parish officials opted not to evacuate their inmates prior to the storm, but Leblanc expects this will change.

“We knew it was headed there. We need to have contraflow emergency evacuation plans for corrections. Jefferson and St. Barnard Parishes started the evacuation for citizens 48 hours prior, then New Orleans happens 24 hours after that. We need a contra corrections flow. The storm didn’t make a turn this time; it bit us,” he said.

But despite these difficulties, corrections officials in Louisiana, Mississippi and toher affected areas have seen their staff do what they do best – respond in crisis with a clear head and an open heart.

“I can’t begin to describe the many things we have done as people and as professionals,” said Warden Fontenot. “We deal with people and people in crisis all the time. It gives you a lot of pride to know you are protecting the public and relating to the victims and the inmates and to reassure them we are stronger than ever. We are going to do what it takes. Our own families depend on us to do our jobs well.”

#### **Resources:**

Jannitta Antoine, Deputy Secretary LA DPS, call 225-342-6744 during regular business hours

Mississippi DOC Disaster Relief Fund, CFGJ/MDOC Fund, 525 East Capitol St.  
Jackson, Miss 39201  
or  
Call 601-974-6044